

Christie Walk: a Co-operative Ecocity Development

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Abstract

Christie Walk in Adelaide is a leading example of sustainable urban design. Developed by a non-profit co-operative in the 90s, Christie Walk was completed in late 2006. The project combines medium density housing with organic food gardens, energy generation and community facilities including a sustainability education hub. The story of Christie Walk illustrates the frustrations and joys of community-led innovation. It provides an example of the potential outcomes of the co-operative sector and offers a pertinent case for the support of innovation in the sector.

The context

Urban Ecology Australia are a non-profit educational and activist group advocating and practising ecocity design. The group acts on an ecocity ethos: “An ecological city is a city in balance with nature” (www.urbanecology.org.au). The group crystallised around the proposed Halifax Ecocity Project, a 2.7 ha, \$60 million proposed ecocity development in inner city Adelaide which was abandoned by the City at the 11th hour. The group consequently focused on a smaller nearby site, the 2000m² site on Sturt St which has become Christie Walk.

The project

The project was conceived as a small piece of ecocity, aiming for sustainable housing with a degree of affordability to be generated through sweat equity, where residents working on their homes reduces the purchase cost. All dwellings were to be owner-occupied. The project was also seen as a tool for awareness raising, community development, teaching sustainable building techniques and focusing ecocity activism.

The site is within walking distance of the Adelaide CBD and public transport and is a few minutes' walk from the Central markets. With 27 households on the site (135 dwellings/ha) the project is quite dense; however, due to sensitive and attractive design there is no sense of crowding or intrusion. The project consists of three freestanding strawbale cottages, four linked three-storey townhouses, a complex of 6 apartments and two townhouses and a complex of 13 apartments, a communal laundry and the community area. The community area houses a kitchen, a dining/meeting room, library, toilets and the new Centre for Urban Ecology.

The site was designed as an integrated community development, underpinned by a unifying ethos of sustainable design combining compact individual dwellings with high-amenity shared spaces. A sense of seclusion and privacy is maintained throughout by the inclusion of community organic food gardens alongside paths, up walls and on rooftops. The thematic continuity of the gardens throughout the development balances this sense of privacy with a sense of wider coherence and unity.

The design includes onsite water sourcing and collection in 2 x 20 000L underground tanks. Each dwelling is solar passive, designed to utilise light and prevailing wind patterns to warm and cool the dwellings; this is further complemented by high insulation. There is solar hot water and power from photovoltaics above the rooftop garden. There are organic food gardens along paths, on rooftops and up walls, with deciduous perennials such as grapevines providing shade in summer, light in winter and a food source.

The project sought to source labour and materials as ethically and sustainably as possible and were keen to maintain a pro-active, welcoming atmosphere onsite. This was due to a desire to embody the type of community the group wanted to be part of and develop (ie., welcoming, proactive and engaged) and was especially important in the face of the near-overwhelming obstacles encountered over time. The development is also the focal point for ongoing educational and activist activities and roles underpinned by the driving ethics of social and ecological justice.

The process

Christie Walk presented a series of challenges to the housing system. The core aims were to develop socially and ecologically just housing through socially and ecologically just development processes as a small-scale example of an ecocity, and to be a source of information, knowledge, learning and advocacy about ecocities. This translated into the formation and involvement of a non-profit educational/activist group (Urban Ecology Australia), a for-profit architectural firm (Ecopolis Architects), a non-profit housing co-operative (Wirranendi) and a for-profit ethical builder (Ecocity Developments Pty Ltd).

Urban Ecology Australia (UEA) is still housed onsite in the new Centre for Urban Ecology. UEA was a major source of volunteer labour, donations and interest-free philanthropic loans to the development. Wirranendi was established as a private non-profit co-operative to retain independence from perceived constraints of public partnership or funding, but this eroded the possibility of affordability due to market pressures. Wirranendi consisted of resident and non-resident members and was the primary body steering the development. Ecocity Developments Pty Ltd was established as a vehicle for hiring staff holding similar ethical values to the core group.

However, these four core entities were represented by a handful of individuals working onsite. This led to the key issue of the potential for overwork, stress and burnout, with essentially community development specialists having to reinvent themselves as accountants, developers and builders responsible for a multi-million dollar inner-city development. This highlights the need for and role of bodies which can perform these duties instead of the resident community, whether that is via government or a co-operative sector support body.

As it was, the development met with unfamiliarity and suspicion from financial institutions, local government, real estate agents and the market. Banks wouldn't lend money for the development, local government upheld policy requirements at odds with the group's ethic of reducing consumption and estate agents didn't know how to sell the sustainability features of the dwellings. Market unfamiliarity manifest both as delays due to unavailability or obscurity of sustainable and ethical building supplies and as prospective buyers being unsure about what they were buying into, expecting some kind of obligation to community activities or particular behaviours. These types of obstructions severely slowed the development process, such that the development started in 1992 with first residents moving in, in 2001 and the

development completed in late 2006. This protracted development process and the group's lack of financial or legislative support also eradicated the project's ability to deliver on the initial ambition of affordable housing. By the project's end however, Christie Walk was being showcased, researched, visited, praised and celebrated and one lender had developed a green home loan on the understanding that residents of similar sustainably designed properties would have lower utility bills and therefore be in a better position to handle mortgage responsibilities.

The project's core drivers though, feel nothing has changed legislatively or in terms of how we think about cities. This raises issues as to how such innovation can become supported and more mainstream.

Questions, issues, lessons

The non-profit development structure, ethical investment base and community involvement enabled this experimental project to proceed and withstand delays and personal tragedies. It survived where a conventional development would probably have been abandoned or changed beyond recognition (Australian Greenhouse Office, 2001)

The level of sensitivity, flexibility and innovation in people-focused design illustrated by Christie Walk is something we should indeed be celebrating and moreover, trying to roll out throughout the housing system. The impediments and challenges faced ranged from specific policy to intangibles and offer much to a consideration of ways forward from here.

Most immediate and perhaps easily addressed, are particular policy items which can stymie the best of design intentions. For instance, policy requirements for multi-unit dwellings specifying that all units must have room for tumble dryers or dedicated car spaces, are largely at odds with ecocity developments, focusing as these do on car-free cities and pooled resources. While these are not issues easily addressed by across-the-board policy changes, consideration on a case by case basis should proceed with sympathy to the driving ethos of the development. For example, if local government is concerned by a proposed reduction in car spaces—thinking this may push more parked cars onto the road—negotiation with the group can lead to the inclusion of caps on car ownership in the co-operative's by-laws, making these part of the residents' legal obligations. Similarly, the co-op can be granted permission to establish resources such as a car-share pod or bicycle workshop and parking facility onsite to promote more benign transport forms. These spaces can also become resources for the broader community

This illustrates the potential role of local government in terms of working with community-based developers to obtain more sustainable design outcomes. A core issue here is the less tangible issue of trust; when Christie Walk was being conceived and built, UEA were an unknown quantity, sustainable design was still largely a fringe concern and local government was unnerved by the design objectives and outcomes being sought. We are 16 years down the track from Christie Walk's birth, and local government and financial institutions are increasingly pondering their ability to engage with sustainability and affordability. So we are perhaps blessed by time passing and the world catching up with the thinking behind Christie Walk - to an extent. While the market is increasingly promoting sustainable design and eco-properties are increasingly the darling of the property pages, the key challenge is the retention of the social justice parameters of the ecocity. That is, the emerging trend for ecologically

sound properties to reside at the upper end of an already overheated market, is a key issue to redress.

Opportunities

Thankfully, with the emergence of proven community-based housing developers, opportunities are arising for local government support of innovation in environmentally and socially just housing. Partly this can be through assistance with development application processes and supportive staff, but there needs to be identification of the forms of structural assistance and tasks that government can perform in helping the delivery of environmental and social outcomes.

Currently, initiatives such as debt equity schemes via Affordable Housing Innovation Fund monies and the proposed National Affordable Rental Scheme offer windows for local government to partner with affordable housing bodies, including co-operatives. The secondary co-op model proposed in the Willoughby Council project offers an interesting example, as it proposes no cost to council in terms of assets, cash or managerial obligations and relieves the co-op of the workload of financial and property management, such that the co-op can focus on what it does best: community development and capacity building. In that model, such management would be performed by the non-profit community housing developer.

An issue regarding that project though, is the apparent absence of an existing co-op in the area. Parachuting a co-op into the dwellings after the development would seem to run contra to the co-op sector ethos of community-based development, potentially turning the co-op into a quirky tenure form rather than a vehicle for local community endeavour and capacity building. Ultimately there may be a role for this if co-ops and their focus on participative democracy become a completely normal part of a housing market able to deliver affordability, and I hope we get there. The current issue however, seems to be how local community capacity building can be married to models such as secondary co-ops, partnership with local government and/or access to state and federal money for affordable housing innovation.

Historically, housing co-operatives in Australia seem to have been caught between the financial or geographical perils of autonomy and the financial, design and project constraints of reliance on public funding. Growing awareness regarding affordability and sustainability issues and the emergence of models and funds appropriate to these issues means we may be at a point to be able to move beyond this. Local government is ideally placed to identify and respond to local affordability concerns, environmental issues, sociocultural dynamics and community need. Affordable housing co-ops striving for sustainable design would seem to address these key concerns.

Reference

Australian Greenhouse Office (2001) Your home technical manual: design for lifestyle and the future. http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/yourhome/technical/fs73_6.htm.